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ABSTRACT

Intellectuals lament the disappearance of community, a nostalgia for the small town that has supposedly given way to the anonymous crowds of the city. Likewise, scholars have talked about "discourse communities" in romantic terms, referring to a place where all share the same values. However, a more urban view of social life, in which participants differ widely on values, might help teachers to rethink the work that goes on in the classroom. The term "community" has a positive opposing term: "public," a term which refers to a space, or point of contact. For the author Richard Sennett, a public space is one where strangers meet and talk, a site of difference and not consensus. The classroom should become such a public space, a zone of contact between competing views. In a class at the University of Pittsburgh, "Writing About Film," students were asked to write about any scene or image in the movie, "Do The Right Thing," that was difficult to interpret. Three selected responses indicated the range of opinions, and through discussion, support for each reading was presented. The goal was not to move closer to some ideal understanding of the film, but to determine why students chose to "read" it as they did. After rewriting the papers, the ways in which the class discussions had shaped the revised responses became clear. Students define their own voices partly through the public discourse of the classroom, demonstrating the value of the wrangle as opposed to the value of any push for consensus. (Fifteen references are attached.) (HB)

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A COMMUNITY OF STRANGERS

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"I don't want no Jesuses in my promised land," is how Lester Bangs put it (259). The line comes near the end of a piece he wrote on the Clash, and to appreciate what he meant by it, you have to know that Bangs loved the Clash, admired not only their skill and energy as musicians, but also their lack of pretense, the wit and nerve of their lyrics, and most of all the open and democratic stance they took towards their fans. In their songs the Clash often railed against the culture and politics of Thatcherite Britain, but they had little interest in becoming the spokesmen for a cause or the leaders of a movement. But they didn't keep a distance from their fans either. Instead they simply let themselves be part of the crowd, talking and drinking and hanging out with the people who came to listen to their music. Bangs saw in them what rock culture might look like if it wasn't divided into leaders and followers, stars and groupies, backstage insiders and outside nobodies.

Like Bangs I don't want no Jesuses in my promised land either. Most talk about utopias scares me. What I value instead is a kind of openness, a lack of plan, a chance both to be among others and to choose my own way. It is a kind of life I associate with the city—with the sort of community in which people are brought together more by accident or need than by shared values. For instance, I know very few of the people who live on my city block by name, and have at best only a vague idea of what they do for a living, much less of what their politics or beliefs or values are. And yet it is a great block to live on: People take care of their houses, shovel the snow from their walks, keep an eye out for the

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neighborhood kids, report prowlers, bring lost dogs back to their homes, buy church candy and girl scout cookies, and the like. We keep watch but we do not intrude. Through this we form what Richard Sennett, also in writing about city life, has called a "community of strangers" (4).

What we don't have to do as neighbors is act or even meet together as a group, and so we have little need to form some set of collective aims or beliefs, some kind of block identity. This is not the case with groups—like academic disciplines or university departments or college writing classrooms—that are formed to do certain kinds of work or to achieve certain goals. But these can still be set up in ways that are open to difference and change. For instance, while the department I work in has tried hard to define a sense of mission and identity, it has also long been committed to building on the strengths and interests of the people in it (rather than imposing a plan of reform on them from above). What this means is that we sacrifice a certain amount of coherence in the name of diversity. Not only have rival factions or programs formed around various areas of interest—theory, composition, film, creative writing—but there are also plenty of individuals who don't quite fit in with any group, who were hired ten or twenty or thirty years ago to do a certain job in what was then a very different department, and who have hung on to do it since, some adapting more, some less, to the shifts around them. And of course the people we hire from year to year bring new interests and concerns along with them. What gets done is thus often as much the result of accident as plan. Strange alliances get formed, awkward compromises made, improbable connections and solutions found. We argue a lot, and seem almost continuously to be revising the courses we offer in piecemeal and ad hoc ways. And that, it seems to me, is pretty much how things should be. Or at least I feel more at home in such a department than I would in one whose tone and direction were more settled.

Though of course such an absence of shared values has more often been viewed as a loss. There is a long tradition of lament among intellectuals about the disappearance of real community, a nostalgia for the closeness of the town or village or parish that, it is argued, has since given way to the anonymous crowds of the city. Such a yearning for community also marks many utopian dreams of reform. There are few utopias in film or literature that are set in anything like a large industrial city, and this makes sense, since such cities are almost the antithesis of planned communities. But the city is the site of many dystopias. (Think of *Bladerunner, Robocop, Escape From New York.*) There are no Jesuses in the big city, or actually, there's often a new one on each corner, and their clamor and conflict don't much make for a vision of ideal community. But there is also a freedom to be had in the chaos and anonymity of city life. That has always been its allure. In an essay I wrote a few years ago, I argued that we have tended to talk about "discourse communities" in far too romantic, organic, and pastoral terms, that we have in effect pictured such communities more as small closely knit villages—where everyone pretty much shares the same set of values and concerns—than as large and polyglot cities, where everyone doesn't. I want to push that contrast a little further here, to suggest how a more urban and less utopian view of social life might help us rethink the kinds of work that can go on in our classrooms.

In doing so, I want to bring a term back into our conversation that was once a key one in rhetoric but that lately seems to have fallen out of use or favor. In my earlier piece, I cited Raymond Williams' famous remark that, alone among the words used to describe social groups, community seems "never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term" (76). Since then no one has come up to me in order to say, why yes there is such a positive opposing term, but in continuing to read and think about the issue, I have become convinced that one does exist. The word is *public*, a term that does not even appear in Williams' *Keywords*, but that has been central to the work of many American intellectuals—among them John Dewey, Walter Lippman,

Hannah Arendt, C. Wright Mills, Richard Sennett, and, most recently, Kenneth Cmiel. Jay Rosen has argued that the importance of the term to such thinkers has had to do with the ways they have tried to use it in theorizing a *large scale* form of democracy. The idea of a public, he suggests, has been a key if troubled move in imagining a kind of discourse that can transcend the interests of local communities and regulate those of states. What I find most interesting about this notion of a public is that it refers not to a group of people (like community) but to a kind of space, a point of contact that must be continuously repaired and maintained. For what keeps such a public alive is not a shared set of values but a tolerance of diversity, a willingness to go on talking.

Richard Sennett draws on a similar distinction in *The Fall of Public Man*. For Sennett, a public space is one where strangers meet and talk. It is a site of difference rather than consensus, of bargaining rather than sharing. The classic example is again a cosmopolitan city. It makes little sense to talk of a place like New York City as a community; it is too sprawling, diverse, heterogeneous. But you can think of it as a kind of public space where the members of various communities or neighborhoods, the advocates of competing interests or constituencies, can come to argue out their aims and differences. Or take the department I work in once again. Viewed as a whole, we are not much of a community, and I am glad of that, though perhaps some of our subgroups (creative writing, film, composition) might be seen as such. What the department can do that these subgroups cannot is provide a public space where these programs can meet to sort out needs, resources, and priorities.

I don't mean to argue here for some idealized version of a public sphere, some free market of viewpoints and ideas. Not all communities or interests are allowed anything near a fair or equal hearing in most public debates, and some are not allowed access to them at all. I am instead thinking of a public space as something like what Mary Louise Pratt has called a "contact zone," a place where conflicts of interest are made visible. The term gives

us a way of describing the sort of talk that takes place *across* borders and constituencies. It suggests that we speak as *public* intellectuals when we talk with strangers rather than with the members of our own communities and disciplines. And where we are most likely to do that is not in our writings as scholars or critics but in our work as teachers.

And so what I do want to argue for is a view of the classroom as a public space, a zone of contact between competing views and languages, rather than as a kind of entry point into some imagined community of academic discourse. Let me offer an example. One of the courses I teach at Pitt is a beginning undergraduate class on Writing About Film. My goal in this course is not so much to introduce students to the academic study of the cinema as it is to get them thinking and writing about the ways they *already* have of looking at movies and TV. As a way of beginning to surface these kinds of viewing strategies, one of the first things I usually ask students to do is to locate a point where their understanding of a film breaks down, to write about a scene or image in a movie that they have trouble making sense of—that confuses or disturbs them, or that they have trouble fitting in with the rest of the film, or that just makes them angry somehow. I then ask them to recreate the scene as well as they can in their writing and to define the problem it poses for them as viewers.

Last spring we looked at Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*. Lee's movie is set in the Bed-Stuy neighborhood of Brooklyn and offers a picaresque series of glimpses into life on a city block on the hottest day of summer. Lee himself plays Mookie, a young black man who delivers pizzas for Sal, a likeable Italian patriarch who owns and runs the neighborhood pizzeria, and who along with his two sons, both of whom work in his shop, are almost the only white characters we see. Early on in the movie we see what seems a routine blow-up between Sal and one of his customers, Buggin' Out, another young black man who fancies himself something of a political activist, and who tries to organize a neighborhood boycott of the pizzeria until Sal replaces some of the pictures of Italians on his "Wall of Fame" with photos of African-Americans. But the only support Buggin' Out

is able to raise comes from two fringe characters: Radio Raheem, a mean-looking hulk of a man who walks up and down the street blaring the rap music of Public Enemy from his giant boombox, and Smiley, a stuttering street hawker of photographs of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

While tempers flare at a number of other points during the day, none of these exchanges come to much, and the overall mood of the film is comic and quick. So when near the end of the movie Sal decides to re-open his doors to give a few teenagers a late-night slice, it seems as if the boycott and whatever threat it might have posed to the routine peace of block are over, that the neighborhood has managed to get through the hottest day of the year without serious incident. But this isn't the case, as Buggin' Out, Raheem, and Smiley also take this occasion to renew their threat to close Sal down, and Sal and Raheem find themselves in a fight that erupts quickly and ends tragically. Harsh words lead to a wrestling match that sends the two men crashing into the street. Raheem pins Sal to the sidewalk and seems on the verge of strangling him when a white policeman pulls him away and, as a crowd watches in horror, chokes Raheem to death with his nightstick. Panicked, the police throw Raheem's lifeless body into a squad car and escape, leaving the enraged crowd to loot and burn down Sal's pizzeria in revenge.

I decided to start our talk in class about the movie by looking at three student responses to this scene. What interested me about these three readings was how each writer defined the boundaries of the scene differently, so that in each of their accounts a different action was emphasized, and different sort of blame or responsibility assessed. In the first piece, Holly Affeltranger focused on the strangling of Radio Raheem, concluding that the "problem . . . in my eyes, is the police brutality and how it is covered up." (While I don't have the time here to read through their writings, I have excerpted parts of their texts on your handout.) What bothered Samantha Regnier, though, was the illogic of the riot that follows Raheem's death. Samantha began her account almost exactly where Holly left off,

recounting how, after sacking Sal's pizzeria, the mob then turns on the Korean grocery, only to halt "with aggression yet fatigue" when its owner claims, however illogically, that he too is black, a victim rather than an oppressor. This troubled Samantha, since it is made clear throughout the film that Sal treats his customers with an affection and respect that the Korean grocer lacks entirely, and yet the mob destroys his pizzeria while they leave the grocery untouched. Samantha went on to argue that while Sal is shown as "open-minded" through most of the film, in the end he proves "not willing to change, or 'go along' with the blacks, but the Koreans were." For her the real issue thus came down to who got to claim ownership of the neighborhood. "Whatever the case the blacks were still trying to make the point of saying this is our neighborhood, we have lived here for years and you think you can just come in and take over." Underlying the savagery of the riot, then, was the sort of ethnic pride that warrants the use of "violence to receive . . . social justice"—a phrasing that seems to obliquely criticize Malcolm X's claim, quoted by Lee at the end of the movie, that blacks have "the right to do what is necessary" in fighting for their freedom. And so while Holly's horror at the cops' brutality led her to see Lee as arguing against the racism of "the system," Samantha read the movie instead as indicting the sort of ethnic or racial pride that can quickly devolve into simple racism and violence.

Jim Khury offered yet a third reading of the scene that focused on the verbal duel between Sal and Raheem that leads up to the fight described by Holly and the riot discussed by Samantha. Looking at how Sal shifts suddenly from the role of friendly *pater familias* to screaming racist led Jim to conclude that:

> . . . Here you saw Sal's true, hidden feelings come out. Through the entire film you see how Sal gets along with the blacks, but when confronted, he explodes physically and verbally at the blacks. . . . The film illustrates how deep nested and inevitable racism is. Though Sal accepted the blacks and was thankful for their business, that was the extent of it. As people, he didn't really respect them. . . .

And so while Jim agreed with Samantha and Holly in seeing the movie as an attack on racism, he differed with Samantha in viewing Lee's anger as directed largely against *white*

racists, and unlike Holly he refused to distinguish the actions of Sal from those of the cops. In many ways, Jim offered the bleakest reading of the movie, since he saw its critique as directed at one of the most likeable characters in it. If Sal is a racist, then so it would seem are we all, and the inevitable result of this will be violence, either to fight the power or to defend it.

In leading our talk about these papers, I insisted that at first our goal would simply be to understand and describe (but not yet to evaluate) the readings of the film they offered. I thus asked the class not to compare these three readings yet, to argue right off for one or the other, but instead to think about how you might go about making the best possible case for each. Where else might you go to in the film, for instance, to support Holly's sense that Lee's anger is directed more against the "system" than against white people in general? Or how might you strengthen Samantha's claim that the "ethnic pride" of blacks is also being critiqued in the film? To have them do so, I broke the class into three groups, with each assigned the task of coming up with more evidence for one of these ways of reading the film.

Each group came up with a striking amount of support for the view of the film they had been asked to discuss. The students who talked about Jim's paper noted several other scenes where Sal could be seen as being less friendly than patronizing; they then remarked that it was, after all, the director of the movie, Spike Lee, who plays the character, Mookie, who starts the riot, which would seem to suggest that he has at least some sympathy for such actions; and they also pointed to how the last words of the film literally belong to Malcolm X, in a printed passage that speaks of the possible need for violence in a struggle for justice. In response, the group working with Holly's paper pointed out that in the scenes that follow the riot we see Sal and Mookie come if not to a reconciliation then at least to an uneasy truce. They also noted that, in the closing shot of the film, we hear the voice of a local radio DJ lamenting the violence that has just taken place and exhorting

political action instead. Similarly, the group dealing with Samantha's paper had a list of scenes that poked fun (sometimes gentle and sometimes not) at the black residents of the block, and they also noted that the passage by Malcolm X at the end of the movie is preceded by one in which Martin Luther King argues *against* the use of violence. And so by the end of our talk that evening, we had developed not a single collective reading of the film but three distinct and competing views of it. This allowed me to suggest to the class that, in revising their own writings for next week, their task was not to somehow move closer to some ideal or correct understanding of the movie, but to show why, when faced with such an array of competing interpretations, they chose to read it as they did.

There was thus no move towards a more collective view of the movie as we continued to write and talk about it. Instead many students worked in revising to further define and sharpen the differences they had with other viewers. In her first draft, for instance, Sidney Cooper, an African American woman, had centered her writing on the anger she felt when watching the murder of Radio Raheem. But by the time she wrote her second draft, though, her response had become more complex and ambivalent, as she talked about her growing reluctance to side with the anyone at the end of the movie. Midway through her piece Sidney quoted the critic Jacquie Jones asking if "the destruction of Sal's . . . is a reasonable response to unreasonable circumstances," and she also made note of Spike Lee's claim that the riot expresses of the "horror" of the "whole community" at the death of Raheem. But she was no longer willing to see one form of violence or horror as a reasonable response to another, and so she brought her second draft to a close by saying:

> When I watched this scene, in the back of my mind, I was with Mookie, cheering him on to burn Sal's down to the ground after what they did. But who is or are "they"? This now brings us back to the question of whose hands do we place the blame: on the police, on Sal or Raheem, and this we do not know. When we can pinpoint who actually was responsible for Raheem's death, then we can decide whether everyone's reactions are justifiable. Until this is determined, I feel no one did the "right thing."

What strikes me here is how Sidney draws on not only the comments of Jones and Lee but our previous talk in class as well. In asking about where we can place blame, "on the police, Sal or Raheem," she was making use of a kind of shorthand we had formed for referring to the positions represented by Holly, Jim, and Samantha's papers—for readings of the movie viewing it as directed either against the system (the police), white racism (Sal), or aggressive ethnic pride (Raheem). Sidney was not able in this draft to push beyond or even choose among these three positions, but her writing suggested that she was willing take such readings seriously, while still holding on to much of her anger at the racial hatred that underlies Raheem's death.

In other cases you could see how the work of the class had led some students to view the film in ways that seemed at once new and their own. For instance, while Keith Davis had failed to make his sense of the film very clear in his first writing, he began to articulate a strong critique of it in later drafts as he worked with and through the comments of other viewers. In writing his second draft, Keith decided that instead of focussing on what the film had to say to black viewers like himself, he would look at the picture of African American life that *Do The Right Thing* offered to his white classmates. This shift in perspective allowed him to talk about some problems he had with the movie that he had not been able to get at before, as he ended up arguing that, "Spike does not develop his characters enough to make his movies come alive. . . . This is the only Black community many whites will ever see, yet they are seeing a distorted picture of that community."

Sometimes the effects of our reading and talk were even less predictable. One student, Christine Tappe, was married to a policeman, and thus felt much less inclined than most others in the class to blame the cops for the death of Radio Raheem. As part of her second draft, Christine argued that the police were "not responsible for the underlying issue of racism, although they were the vehicles through which the prejudice was being

transported." Lee's point, she suggested, was not to focus on racial issues alone, but to deal with "other human and not always color-specific emotions such as rage and frustration." This in turn led her to focus on the *sexual* politics of the film, and the rest of her paper was a close analysis of a scene in the pizzeria where Mookie angrily looks on as Sal dotes on one of his favorite customers, Jade, who happily flirts back with him. The problem is that Jade is Mookie's sister, and the scene ends with him pulling her out into the street for a heated lecture against black-white sex. Christine read this scene as where we see Mookie finally "choose his loyalties," and she argued that it shows that he has some personal as well as political reasons to later become part of the mob that loots Sal's shop.

I like how these second drafts show their writers responding to other views of the movie without simply adopting or rejecting them. Instead they forge their readings of the film under pressure, in tension with other views of the text, and in doing so begin to define their own voices within the public discourse of the classroom. In *The Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke compares the give and take of such intellectual debate to a "somewhat formless parliamentary wrangle," a "horse-trading" of ideas in which individual critics try to grab support for their own positions through whatever deals, borrowings, and alliances they can strike up with some colleagues, and whatever raids or attacks they can make on the views of others (188). While I prefer this description of intellectual work to Burke's much more often quoted metaphor of an ongoing parlor conversation, I have to admit that there seems something slightly disreputable about it, and Burke himself points to the temptation, especially among teachers, to give form to such wrangles by placing opposing views in dialectical tension with each other, so that their conflicts can then be resolved at some "higher" or "ultimate" level (188-89). The best example of this sort of dialectic is of course found, as Burke points out, in the dialogues of Plato—which characteristically begin with Socrates facing a diverse set of opinions on a subject (what is piety? what is justice?) and then gradually leading his listeners to a consensus about what can or cannot be

known about it. In the first book of *The Republic*, Socrates argues for the merit of this approach, saying:

> If we were to oppose him [Thrasymachus, a sophist who is his current foil in the dialogue] . . . with a parallel set speech on the blessings of the just life, then another speech from him in turn, then another from us, then we should have to count and measure the blessings mentioned on each side, and we should need some judges to decide the case. If on the other hand, we investigate the question, as we were doing, *by seeking agreement with each other*, then we ourselves can be both the judges and the advocates. (348b, Grube 21, my italics)

From opposing speeches to agreement, diversity to consensus, wrangle to dialogue—that is the usual progress of teaching. What I have hoped to show here is the value of keeping things at the level of a wrangle, of setting up our classrooms so that a variety of views are laid out and the arguments for them made, but then trying *not* to push for consensus, for an ultimate view that resolves or explains the various conflicts that can surface in such talk. A problem with much teaching, it seems to me, is that the teacher often serves only too well as both judge and advocate of what gets said, pointing out the weaknesses of some positions while accenting the strengths of others. I'd like to see instead a classroom where student writings function something like the "set speeches" that Socrates derides, that serve as positions in an argument whose blessings we can count and measure together, but whose final merits we can leave students to judge for themselves. That is, I'd rather have a wrangle that even if it is somewhat formless (or perhaps because it is) gives students a set of chances to come to their own sense of a text or issue, than a dialogue whose course has been charted in advance by their teacher. I don't want no Jesus and I don't want no Socrates either. What I do want is a sort of teaching that aims more to keep a certain kind of talk going than to lead it towards a certain end, that tries to set up not a community of agreement but a community of strangers, a public space where students can begin to form their own voices as writers and intellectuals.

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